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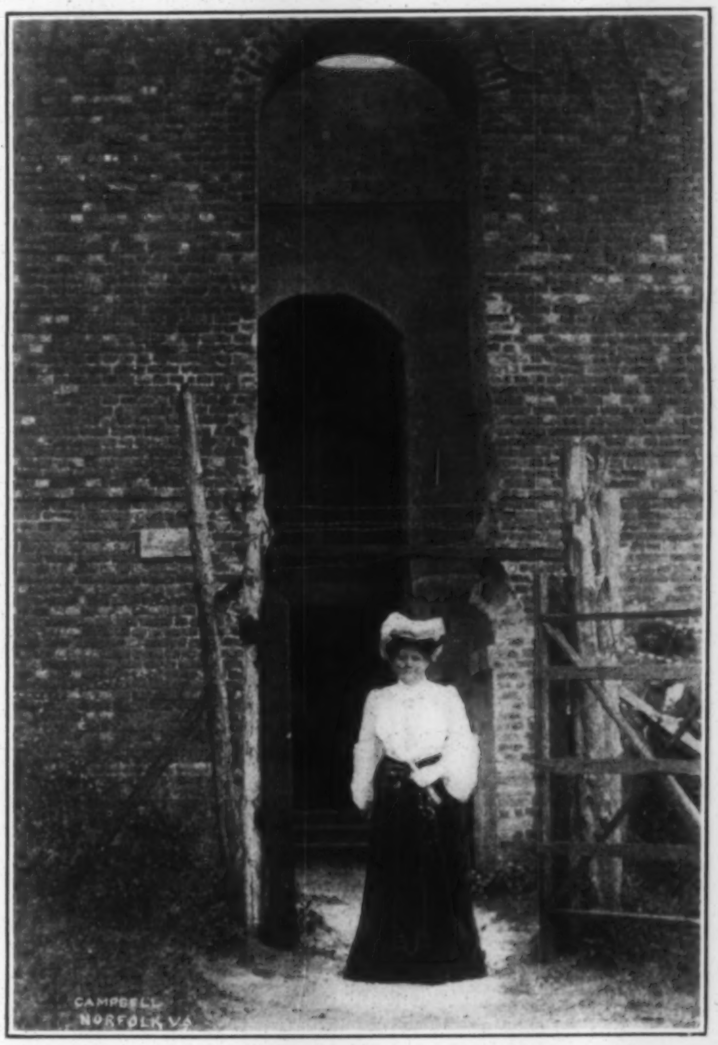
WITCHCRAFT IN VIRGINIA.



It should be a subject of congratulation to Virginians, even at the present day, that their ancestors of colonial times were comparatively untouched by the fury of fanaticism that raged in New England toward the end of the seventeenth century. A more peculiar and more baneful season of public madness history hardly records, than that which seized at this time the extreme northern States of the young country. Mothers accused their daughters, and brothers their sisters, of having entered with the devil into a compact, by which a complete surrender was made of the soul, in return for certain mysterious and superhuman faculties. Around Salem, Massachusetts, the state of affairs all but attained proportions of a local Reign of Terror, and all through the New England colonies frightened women, under torture, were acknowledging their employment of forbidden powers. The worst of it was, that the inquisition was carried on with the sanction and the active participation of the clergy, and the public and private denunciations of Cotton Mather and his contemporaries goaded their parishioners on to further excesses. But the facts and traditions of this unique and interesting episode in American history are too well known to need elaboration here. Our concern is particularly with the manifestation of the epidemic in Virginia. Upon the subject as thus restricted, many detached articles and notes have been published; but, so far as we have seen, there has been no successful attempt to sum up comprehensively the various instances of alleged witchcraft in this State, and the several incidents that tend to throw light on the subject. Such is the object of the present paper, which lays no claim to discoveries or even original research. The general court records alone, and these only in part, have been available, and full use has been made of the investigation of others, wherever found. The chronological order will be mainly followed in mentioning the various cases.

The first instance of witchcraft in Virginia is found in the Virginia Council and General Court Records for 1640-1641. The case is a minor one, and is interesting only as showing that it was customary to employ the name "witch" as a term of reproach.

"April 13, 1641.

"Whereas it appeareth to the Court by several depositions that Jane Rookins hath abused and scandalized the wife of George Barker by calling her a witch, which the said Rookins doth not remember, but denyeth in open court and is sorry for the same offence with which she, the said Barker, is very well satisfied, the court hath therefore ordered that William Rookins, husband of the said Jane, forthwith pay unto the said Barker expenses and charges of the court in the behalf sustained, otherwise execution."

Next in order comes an entry in the notes from the Council and General Court Records, 1641-1644:

"1644.

"Captain Barrett had to appear at the admiralty court to answer to the putting to death of Kath. Grady as a witch at sea."

A similar case of the execution of an alleged witch on a sea voyage is cited by Dr. Neill, in Virginia Carolorum. In reality, the case has no right to be included in the present list, for the reason that it had no direct connection with Virginia. The incident occurred on the ship Charity, which left England for Virginia in 1654. The voyage was stormy, and Mary Lee, "a little and quite aged woman," was suspected of witchcraft, examined by two men, and found to possess witch marks. She was compelled to spend one night bound to the capstan, and finally confessed to forbidden powers and practices. Against the will and advice of the captain of the ship, she was hung and cast into the sea.

133.4-W81

CARD CATALOGUED

Under date of November 20, 1656, the books of Northumberland County bear the following record, brought to light by Dr. Tyler:

"20 Nov., 1656.

"Whereas articles were exhibited agt. Wm. Harding by Mr. David Lindsaye upon suspicion of witchcraft, sorcery, &c., and an able jury of twenty-four men were empanelled to try the matter by verdict of wch. jury they found part of the articles proved by several. The court doth therefore order yt ye sd. Wm. Harding shall forthwith receave ten stripes upon his bare back and forever to be Banished this country and yt hee depart within the space of two months. And also to pay all the charges of the court."

Among the cases tried by the General Court is this:

"December, 1657.

"Barbary Wingbrough arraigned for a witch, but acquitted. Who should pay the witnesses referred to Assembly?"

Dr. Neill, in giving an account of John Washington, the ancestor of George Washington, relates an incident which throws some light on the attitude of prominent Virginians to this deplorable superstition. During the voyage from the northern country to the Chesapeake Bay, in 1658, the crew of the ship on which Washington was a passenger, executed a certain Elizabeth Richardson for the crime of practising witchery. John Washington was indignant at this cruelty, and, though he resided in Westmoreland county, in Virginia, protested in a complaint to the General Court of Maryland, to which State the ship was consigned. Accordingly, the owner of the ship, one Prescott, was placed on trial in October, 1654. His defense was that the crew and captain had committed the felony against his will. "That he withstood ye proceedings of his sd. master & company & protested ag'st them in that business, and that thereupon both ye master & company were ready to mutiny." He was acquitted.

Ten years after this incident, we find two more cases of witchcraft in Virginia, recorded in the documents of the General Court:

"Oct. 16, 1668.

"Alice Stephens accused as a witch, but not cleared."

"Nov. 24, 1668.

"Judgment for calling a woman and her children witches. Pardon craved."

After another interval of ten years, the following record claims our notice:

"Lower Norfolk County, Va.

"Att a court held the 15th January, 167-8-9.

"Capt. Wm. Robinson,
"Mr. Adam Keeling,
"Mr. Henry Spratt,
"Capt. Anthony Lawson, } Justices.

"In the diff. between Jno. Salmon, plaintiff, agt. Alice, the wife of Thomas Cartwrite, defendt, a Jury of women (Mrs. Mary Chichester, forewoman) being impaneled did in open court upon their oaths declare that they having diligently Searched the body of the sd. Alice & cann find noe Suspitious marks whereby they can Judge her to be a witch butt onely what May and Is usuall on women. It is therefore the Judgment of the court and ordered that shee bee acquitted and her husbands bond given for her appearance to bee given up."

It may be worth while, just here, to depart from the chronological order, for the purpose of giving a little incident which occurred many years after the last recorded case of Witchcraft in the country. On the 22d of October, 1735, Col. Wm. Byrd 2d wrote a letter to Mr. John Hamburg, of London, in which we find this passage:

"I am glad to hear your ship The Williamsburg got home well, and that Crane agreed with a witch at Hampton for a fair wind all the way."

From this reference, made by so prominent a Virginian as Mr. Byrd, who was well known in his day as a statesman and lover of literature, we can understand how prevalent was the superstition for many years after the fire of active persecution had been smothered.

The most famous of the Virginia witches, and the one whose name is always associated most naturally with any discussion of the matter, is Grace Sherwood, known in history as "The Virginia Witch." In regard to her social position, it is satisfactorily shown by deeds and other documents in the county records that she was by no means an outcast, but on the contrary possessed some property, and belonged to the respectable working class. Nevertheless, she seems to have excited several times suspicion of having exercised for evil purpose the powers of a witch, and was more than once the object of slander to that effect. At a court held in Princess Anne county on the 4th of February, 169-7-8 we find:

"James Sherwood and Grace his wife suing Richd. Capps in an action of Defamacon Damages fifty pnds Sterl and the Deft failing to appeare, and the Sheriffe to take security, order is granted the said Sherwood agst the Sheriffe for it shall appeare due unless he produced him next Court attachmt granted ye Sheriffe &c."

On March 3, 169-7-8 "The Difference between James Sherwood and Grace his wife plantiffes, and Richard Capps Deft being ended by the parties, is ordered to be Dismist."

Again on the 10th of September of the same year, James and Grace Sherwood are "Sueing John Gisbourne and Jane his wife in an action of slander setting forth by his petition that the Defendts. had wronged Defamed and abused the said Grace in her good name and reputation saying that she is a witch and bewitched their piggs to Death and bewitched their cotton & prays judgment against the said Gisbourne for £100 damage with cost." The case was decided in favor of the defendant.

A third time James and Grace Sherwood bring suit for slander; this time against Anthony and Elizabeth Barnes, claiming "that the sd. Elizb. had wronged and abused the said Grace in her good name and reputation saying the sd. Grace came to her one night and rid her and went out of the keyhole or crack of the door like a black catt &c. prayes judgment for £100 Sterling damage with cost." Again the verdict is against the plaintiffs.

On December 7, Grace Sherwood, now a widow, is once more in trouble, and appears in court "Sueing Luke Hill & Uxor In an action of Trespass & Assault & Batt'ry Setting forth how ye Df'ts wife had assaulted, Brus'd Maimed & Barbarously Beaten yee pt." This time she received damages, though considerably smaller than her claim; for, having demanded £50 she is indemnified to the extent of only twenty shillings.

Luke Hill and his wife were not tardy in taking their revenge for the paltry fine. For in the next month they enter suit against Grace Sherwood on the old charge of witchcraft, which, as we have seen, had already furnished material to the gossiping tongues of several of her acquaintances. This accusation was destined to cause her more annoyance than any of the preceding ones.

"At a court held ye 3d of Jan'ry 1705-6.

"Whereas Luke Hill & uxor Som'd Grace Sherwood to this Court in Suspition of witchcraft and she fayling to apear, it is therefore ordr yt attachmt to ye Sherr do Issue to attach her body to ans'r ye s'd som next Court."

When the court met again on the 6th of February, it was ordered that the suit be postponed till the next day, at which time the following provision was made:

"Whereas Compl't was brought agt. Grace Sherwood on Suspition of witchcraft by Luke Hill &c: & ye matter being after a long time debated & ord'r y't y'e s'd Hill pay all fees of this Compl't & y't y'e s'd Grace be here next Court to be Searched according to y'e compl't by a jury of women to decide y'e S'd Diferr: & y'e Sherr is Likewise ord'r to Som an able jury accordingly."

This was agreed to by the defendant, and the jury of women was "impanelled Sworn & Sent out to make Due inquirery & Inspection into all circumstances." "After a mature consideration They bring in y'e Verditt Wee of y'e jury have searchtt Grace Sherwood and have found Two things titts w'th several other Spots."

The court, not knowing how to proceed, refused to continue the trial or

to take further action. But the plaintiffs were not easily discouraged, and appealed to the General Court. That the litigation was not to be settled even here, will be evident from the following:

"At a Council held at her Majesty's Royal Capitol on the 28th of March, 1706, present His Excellency in Council:

"Luke Hill, by his peticon, informing this Board of one Grace Sherwood, of Princess Anne County, being suspected of witchcraft, upon his Compl't to y'e County Court y't she had Bewitched y'e pet'rs wife, ye court ordered a jury of women to search ye sd Grace Sherwood, who upon search, brought in a verdict agt. ye sd. Grace. But ye court not knowing how to proceed to judgment thereon, the pt'r prays that ye Attorney Gen'll may be directed to prosecute the sd. Grace for ye same. Ord'rd y't ye sd. pet'on be referred to Mr. Attorney Gen'll to consider & report his opinion to his Excell'y & ye Council on ye first day of ye next Gen'll Court."

The Attorney General, himseff in no less a dilemma than that which had puzzled both courts, returned the following opinion:

"Virginia Aprill y'e 15th 1706.

"Upon perusall of ye above written Order of this Hono'ble Board, I do consider and am of opinion that the County Court ought to have made a fuller examination of ye matter of fact & to have proceeded therein persuant to ye Directions & power, to County Courts given, by a late Act of Assembly in criminall cases, made and Provided: and if they thought there was sufficient cause to have (according to the Law) committed her to ye Generall prison of this colony, whereby it would have come regularly before ye Generall Court. And whereupon, I should have prepared a Bill for ye Grand Jury & if they had found it, I should have prosecuted. I therefore, with humble submission offer and conceive it proper, that ye said County Court do make a further enquiry into ye matter, & that if they are of opinion that there be cause, they act accordingly to ye above said Law. And I shall accordingly be ready to p'sent a Bill and if found to proceed thereon."

The Council Book, which adds to the report of the Attorney Generall the further excuse "That ye charge or accusation is too general," orders that "a copy of ye said Report bee sent to ye Court of Princess Anne County for their direction in ye premises."

The Lower Court, again encumbered with the difficult case, and "Being of Opinion that there is great cause of Suspicion," ordered, under date of March 2d, 1706, "Y't y'e Sherr take y'e said Grace into his Safe custody untill she shall give bond & security for her appearance to ye next court to be examined de novo & y't ye Constable of ye pr'cinkt go with ye Sherr & Serch ye sd. Grace's House & all suspicious placs carefully for all Images & such like things as may any way Strengthen the suspicion & it is likewise ordered y't ye Sherr som an able jury of women also all Evidences as cann give in anything agt. her in Evidence in behalf of our Sovereign Lady ye Queen. To attend ye next court Accordingly." On June 6th Mr. Maximilian Boush was requested to serve as prosecuting attorney for the State.

The jury called for by the order of May 2d had not appeared at the summons of the sheriff, and were condemned by the court on June 7, 1706 "to be Dalt with according to ye utmost severity of ye Law." The same court likewise ordered that a new jury be impaneled, that witnesses be summoned, and that the accused be kept in custody unless bailed. The trial dragged on slowly, and on July 5th the court, "particularly for want of a jury to serch her," made provision for the ducking test to be used, in order to "have all possible means tryed either to acquit her or Give more strength to ye suspicion." The day appointed proved a damp and rainy one, and the authorities were humane enough to postpone the ordeal, through fear of endangering the health of the accused.

"July 10, 1706.

"Whereas Grace Sherwood being suspected of witchcraft have a long time waited for a ffit uppertunity ffor a ffurther Examination and by her consent and approbacon of ye court it is ordr yt ye sherr take all such convenient assistance of boate and men as shall be by him thought ffit to meet at Jno. Harper's plantacon in ordr to take yt sd Grace forthwith and put her into above man's Dh h and try her how she swims therein always having Care of her life to preserve her from Drowning and as soon as She Comes out yt he requests as many ansient and knowing woman as possible he cann to serch her carefully ffor all teats spotts and marks about her body not usuall in others and yt as they ffind ye same to make report on oath to ye truth thereof to ye Court and further it is ordr yt some women be requested to shift and serch her before she goe into ye water yt she carry nothing about her to cause any further suspicion."

It is conjectured that the court must have ordered a recess so as to witness the ducking, for on the same day, July 10, 1706, we have the following record, which was made after the completion of the ordeal:

"Whereas on complaint of Luke Hill on behalf of her Majesty yt now is agt Grace Sherwood for a person Suspected of Witchcraft and having had Sundry Evidences Sworne agt her proving Many Circumstances to which She could not make any excuse or little or nothing to say in her own Behalf and Seemed to Rely on wt ye Court should Doe and there upon consented to be tryed in ye water and likewise to be ducked again which experiants being tryed and she Swimming wn therein and bound contrary To custom and ye Judgt of all ye spectators and afterwards being searched by ffife ansient women who have all Declared on Oath yt she is not like ym nor noe Other woman yt they ken of having two things like titts on her private parts of a Black Coler being Blacker yn ye Rest of her Body all wch circumstances ye Court weighing in thir consideracon Coe therefore ordr yt ye Sherr take ye Sd Grace Into his Custody and to Commit her body to ye Common Goal of this County there to Secure her by irons or otherwise Directed in ordr for her coming to ye Common Goale of ye county to bee brought to a ffurture Tryall there."

Here we reach the end of the documents having to do with the trial, and the rest of the life of Grace Sherwood is left to the conjectures of the curious. It has been suggested as probable that she was afterwards released, as we have no account of any later trial. It may be interesting to note that under date of September 1, 1708, we find that "judgmt is confest by Grace Sherwood for paymt of 600 lb tob to Christopher Cocke due by an accomp." We have also the copy of her will, drawn up August 20, 1733, by which John Sherwood, her son, was constituted sole executor and made heir to her farm of one hundred and forty-four acres and to all her property except ten shillings, bequeathed to her other two sons, James and Richard. She died seven years later, and her will was presented in court by Jno. Sherwood on the first of October, 1745.

Thus ends the story of Grace Sherwood, as told by the scrawl of the County Clerk. And thus ends also the list of the trials for witchcraft that took place in the Old Dominion. Among the instances mentioned, two are prosecutions for the execution of witches, one made in the Admiralty Court of Maryland by the Virginian John Washington, and the other before the General Court of Virginia. A third instance, we have stated, has no connection with Virginia witchcraft. Of the remaining cases, four are suits for slanderous charges of witchcraft, of which two were settled by the withdrawal of the accusation, and the other two decided in favor of the alleged slanderers. One trial resulted in the banishment of the accused, two in complete acquittal, and in regard to one, only the indefinite phrase "not cleared" is used. Finally, the great Sherwood case, which with a little help from the imagination, affords an excellent narrative, is full of hesitation and kindness manifested by judges and jury, in their reluctance to take any definite action or resort to any extreme measures of pun-

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WITCHCRAFT IN VIRGINIA

(Continued from 3rd page.)

ishment. In short, the combined evidence of these several trials and verdicts points to an attitude on the part of colonial Virginians, of uncertainty and leniency in reference to witchcraft, and a dislike of persecution. There is ample proof that our ancestors shared in the superstition prevalent among their New England cousins, but that they stopped short of the inhuman lengths to which the latter were incited by extravagant zeal. For the escape of Virginia towns from the horrors of Salem, we must thank the sturdy common sense, conservatism, and staunch stability of character, by which the Southerners held within bounds their superstition, and resisted the white heat of fanaticism into which the Northerners were inflamed.

Principal authorities:

William and Mary Quarterly.

Virginia Historical Magazine.

Neill's Virginia Carolorum.

Being a member of the Dorcas Society since 1840, I thought a history of it might interest those who have worked and are still working.

The members are from every denomination in the city, and each has from three to four pensioners to whom they give one dollar a month for six months, and three dollars a year for clothes.

I shall never forget how enthusiastic I felt on entering the room at the first meeting I attended; to see the noble band of women I had to work with.

Miss Martha Taylor was the founder of the Dorcas Society. It was in 1816 one of the only charitable institutions in the Borough. Now each church has so many of their own it is almost impossible to keep up this Society. As each year rolls around we lose one or more of the faithful band, to be supplied by others to take their places.

Among those who have gone before and since my day I will mention a few: Mrs. Isaac Talbot, Miss Martha Taylor, Miss Emma Taylor, Mrs. Dr. Mallory, Mrs. Capt. Cornick, Mrs. C. Williams, Miss Harriett Nash, Mrs. Ben Pollard, Miss Lizzie West, Mrs. Lydia Pinkham, Mrs. Duncan, Mrs. Kate McClean, Mrs. Dr. Atkinson, Mrs. Susan Biggs, Mrs. Grace Sams, and Mrs. Knocke.

Hoping this short sketch may elicit your sympathy and bring in some new subscribers, Yours truly,

H. S.